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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000155

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MARR](#) [FJ](#)  
SUBJECT: FIJI ELECTION POSTPONEMENT IN THE WORKS?  
BAINIMARAMA TRAVELS; POLICE MURDER VERDICTS

REF: A. SUVA 147  
[1](#)B. SUVA 145  
[1](#)C. STATE 40178  
[1](#)D. SUVA 144

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

#### Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Several indicators suggest Fiji interim PM Bainimarama does not really intend to fulfill his pledge to Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders to hold free and fair elections by March 2009. Bainimarama reportedly indicated as much to the PNG and Tonga PMs recently. In addition, the interim government (IG) has endorsed a proposal to revise election laws dramatically (which could be a lengthy process), and the selection of a Supervisor of Elections is taking way too long, with another screw-up last week. We comment that the international community will need to respond if/when the IG announces "with regret" a delay in the elections. Behind the scenes, some politicians from both the SDL and FLP parties may be considering realignments. Efforts continue to arrange a Bainimarama meeting with deposed PM Qarase, though Bainimarama has declined such invitations to date. He currently is on a trip to Dubai, Singapore, and maybe Brunei, returning to Fiji May 2. Two policemen received life sentences for a murder last June. Lengthy pre-trial procedures for military suspects in two other murders continue. The IG's anti-corruption commission has charged the lawyer son of interim Finance Minister Chaudhry with obstruction of justice, possibly an indicator of a rift between the Military Council and Chaudhry. End summary.

Bainimarama and the elections: delay in the works?

[1](#)2. (C) After interim PM Bainimarama met with the PMs of PNG and Tonga in Nadi on April 10, the interim government was silent. Tonga PM Sevele said publicly that Bainimarama had given assurance elections in March 2009 would go ahead as promised. A reliable source told us this week that Bainimarama actually told Sevele and Somare the IG will not meet the election deadline and cited various logistical problems as the cause. Reportedly, the PMs advised Bainimarama that, if he plans to postpone he should make that public sooner rather than later. Today, April 24, interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau reiterated publicly that Fiji elections will take place in March 2009, as promised. On the other hand, when a participant at the Pacific Islands Forum

(PIF)-Fiji Working Group session today reported the pessimistic Bainimarama revelation to the PNG and Tonga PMs, the Fiji side did not deny it. We are told the atmosphere at today's Working Group session was distinctly down-beat. One discussion topic was whether a PIF Ministerial Contact Group, established during the recent Auckland meeting on Fiji, should plan a visit soon to Suva. Comment: While the IG has either deliberately or ineptly slowed the election-preparation process, experts are confident March 2009 would still be possible if a good-faith effort were to take place from now to then. End comment.

#### Building a better election system

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13. (C) International expressions of concern, including from the U.S., about a National Committee for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF, People's Charter) recommendation for a May forum of all parties to consider major reforms to Fiji's election system (see Refs B and C) prompted Bainimarama to issue a media release referring to international critics and mentioning Ambassador Dinger by name. Bainimarama's statement said there is no need to be alarmed or overreact. Dialogue and consultation indicate the people of Fiji want electoral reforms, so it is the "profound duty" of the IG to be responsive. Bainimarama said everything is being done in a transparent manner with every effort to "engage those few who have opted to remain outside...." Bainimarama called on the international community to "engage freely and genuinely" with the IG to help fulfill the commitment made for "holding free, fair, and truly democratic elections as early as possible in 2009."

#### Creating a fire wall with the media

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14. (C) Bainimarama has at times been relatively accessible to media interviews. He makes good copy when he speaks off the cuff because what he thinks, he often says, unfiltered. In recent weeks, Bainimarama has refrained from direct dealings with the media. He has issued instructions that reporters may no longer call his cell phone; he has shunned door-stops; all inquiries must arrive via the Ministry of Information media cell. Now almost always, IG media interactions are via formal statements. Some media leaders see a deliberate attempt on Bainimarama's part to lower the political temperature in light of concerns that some ethnic-Fijian elements may be reaching the boiling point.

#### NCBBF International Monitoring Group

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15. (SBU) The NCBBF, via President Iloilo, has named an International Monitoring Group (IMG) to provide an independent assessment of the People's Charter process. IMG members are Geert van der Linden (a former ADB vice president, now a banker in Australia); Robin Nair (a former Fiji citizen, recently retired from the Australian foreign service); and Caroline Amy Chambers (an Anglican priest in Suva). The group began work last week, including by meeting with us. The IMG's first report was made public April 22. It noted that some important groups (like Qarase's SDL and the Methodist Church) have opted out, and a hoped for ground swell of public support has not yet occurred. It reported criticisms by some that the military and IG are influencing the NCBBF's direction and its outreach campaigns. The IMG urged more efforts to brief important players like the media and the diplomatic community. In general, though, the report seemed mildly supportive of NCBBF efforts so far. More reports are to follow.

#### A Bainimarama-Qarase meeting in the works?

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16. (C) Media report that Methodist Church President Ratabacaca, close to deposed PM Qarase, and Catholic Archbishop Mataca, who co-chairs the NCBBF with Bainimarama, are attempting to arrange a meeting between Bainimarama and

Qarase. Also, Commonwealth envoy Sir Paul Reeves is tentatively scheduled to revisit Suva in the second week of May with the intent to bring Bainimarama and Qarase into dialogue. Per ref D, we are told Bainimarama informed Sevele and Somare he is adamantly of the view that Qarase and his SDL Party are history and not worth talking to. Qarase, for his part, is still talking of how such discussion would be useful. Qarase told the media this week that, with proper groundwork the SDL could possibly support electoral-system revisions of the type the IG recently proposed; but to make such revisions legal, the 2006 Parliament would have to come back into session to pass constitutional amendments.

#### Political party repositioning?

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17. (C) A rumor is spreading in the media (not yet public) that a segment of the SDL Party will soon announce it is aligning with the IG, presumably with the aim to divide the ethnic-Fijian vote in the eventual elections and increase the chances that interim Finance Minister Chaudhry's Fiji Labor Party (FLP) can win. On the other hand, FLP stalwart Krishna Datt and others, who split from Chaudhry after the 2006 elections and who strongly opposed the 2006 coup, have indicated to us they are forming a new, mostly-Indian party that presumably would reduce the FLP's base.

#### Bainimarama to Dubai, Singapore, maybe Brunei

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18. (C) Bainimarama departed on April 18 for Dubai and Singapore. We have heard rumors a private visit to Brunei might also be on the itinerary. A media statement says Bainimarama was to attend the 8th Global Travel and Tourism Summit in Dubai April 20-22 and would have discussions with commercial and financial institutions there. In Singapore, Bainimarama's focus reportedly is to be on "learning from the experiences of Singapore in civil-service and public-sector reforms." Interim AG Sayed-Khaiyum and interim Industry Minister Ricketts are accompanying. (Note: a controversial Fiji Human Rights Commission report last year recommended that Fiji follow the "Singapore model" in regulating the

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media. It would not surprise if Bainimarama and Sayed-Khaiyum take a look at that possibility as well.) Bainimarama is to return to Suva on May 2. During the trip interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau is acting PM.

#### A new Supervisor of Elections...never mind

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19. (C) After months of delays, the IG's Constitutional Offices Commission on April 17 announced the appointment of Dr. Maurice Coughlan, an Auckland lawyer, as Fiji's new Supervisor of Elections. Within 24 hours, reports surfaced that Coughlan had been disbarred in New Zealand in 1992 for malfeasance. He was reinstated in 2003, but he had not revealed the disbarment in his application, nor had the COC done a careful background check. (Note: we hear he had at best a checkered record during several years in PNG as well.) On April 22, the COC and Coughlan agreed he would not take up the post. The COC said it would take another look at the second person on its list (reportedly an Aussie named Ray Gibson, who worked for the Fiji Public Prosecutions Office in recent years.) The COC told the media the latest setback, while unfortunate, would not cause a delay in preparations for March 2009 elections. Note: Australia is helping fund the Supervisor position, but has not been involved in screening candidates. All current candidates are expats.

#### Two policemen sentenced to life for Malasebe murder

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110. (U) The trial of eight policemen charged with beating Tevita Malasebe to death in June 2007 ended on April 22. Judge Shameem found two policemen guilty of murder and sentenced them to life imprisonment. Shameem found a police supervisor guilty of attempting to cover up the crime and sentenced him to two years. The other five were acquitted

for lack of evidence. The murder cases against military personnel for two deaths in custody from early 2007 remain in pre-trial processes.

#### Chaudhry the younger faces FICAC charges

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¶11. (C) The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) has charged Rajendra Chaudhry, a Suva lawyer and son of the interim Finance Minister, with obstruction of justice. In April 2007, Rajendra allegedly blocked a FICAC investigator from interviewing an employee of the Fiji Sports Council. Rajendra, Chairman of the FSC, was apparently also acting as the employee's lawyer. An angry Rajendra told Fiji TV after his indictment that the "I" in FICAC should stand for "incompetent" rather than "independent." Comment: We keep hearing reports that the Military Council is very unhappy with interim Minister Chaudhry and has urged Bainimarama to remove him. Thus far, Bainimarama has declined. The FICAC action against Chaudhry the son may be related. FICAC's acting head is a senior military officer.

#### Comment

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¶12. (C) The recent developments on the election scene -- Bainimarama's reported admission to the PMs, the NCBBF proposal for electoral reform, the supervisor-selection mess, rumors that interim IG Sayed-Khaiyum is drafting new election-participation regulations that would exclude Qarase and the SDL -- all add to our suspicions that the IG does not really intend to hold free and fair elections next March, despite Bainimarama's pledge to Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders in Tonga last October. Delay may be couched in hopeful terms, perhaps needing just a bit more time in order to gather all parties and decide on just the right electoral system for Fiji. But any failure to deliver will be a deliberate effort to keep the IG in power for longer; so the PIF and others in the international community need to be prepared to respond. We and others have already laid public markers, like Ref C. We also have begun discussions with like-minded missions in Suva to dig for new possibilities to increase pressure on the IG.  
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